

Scripture and Sermon for March 5, 2017

Exodus 12: 30-42

Pharaoh arose in the night, he and all his officials and all the Egyptians; and there was a loud cry in Egypt, for there was not a house without someone dead. Then he summoned Moses and Aaron in the night, and said, 'Rise up, go away from my people, both you and the Israelites! Go, worship the LORD, as you said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you said, and be gone. And bring a blessing on me too!'

The Egyptians urged the people to hasten their departure from the land, for they said, 'We shall all be dead.' So the people took their dough before it was leavened, with their kneading-bowls wrapped up in their cloaks on their shoulders. The Israelites had done as Moses told them; they had asked the Egyptians for jewelry of silver and gold, and for clothing, and the LORD had given the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, so that they let them have what they asked. And so they plundered the Egyptians.

The Israelites journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides children. A mixed crowd also went up with them, and livestock in great numbers, both flocks and herds. They baked unleavened cakes of the dough that they had brought out of Egypt; it was not leavened, because they were driven out of Egypt and could not wait, nor had they prepared any provisions for themselves.

The time that the Israelites had lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. At the end of four hundred and thirty years, on that very day, all the companies of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt. That was for the LORD a night of vigil, to bring them out of the land of Egypt. That same night is a vigil to be kept for the LORD by all the Israelites throughout their generations. This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God!

Matthew 4: 1-4

Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. He fasted for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards he was famished. The tempter came and said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread.' But he answered, 'It is written,

"One does not live by bread alone,
but by every word that comes from the mouth of God." '

Let us pray. Amen.

This week, and for the next five weeks, we will explore some of the spiritual challenges of being in the wilderness. From the perspective of the people of Israel, after their release from captivity in Egypt, and from the perspective of Jesus, as he headed toward his entrance to Jerusalem.

Our faith family will be heading into the wilderness sometime this year. On March 26th, we will vote on whether to authorize our Trustees to sell our property and building to a developer, or not. Either way, from that moment on, we will be heading into the wilderness. Not literally, of course, but metaphorically.

From the moment we close on the sale, we will no longer own this building, or this property. We will be in need of a place to worship, a place to share fellowship, a place to call home.

The people of Israel had little warning that their exodus was upon them. Moses and the Israelites were summarily let go by Pharaoh, who was shaken and afraid after all the first-born had died.

There was no time to pack, no time to plan, no time to let the bread of the day rise. One moment people were sleeping, the next they were walking away from captivity.

Not so with us. We have some time. We have an understanding of what we might need for the journey. We will have help. Partners who have offered their home so that we might have a home.

We will be able to plan for the things we will need, both for the journey, and for our arrival. That time will be a blessing for us. It will give us space to pray, to discern, to discuss...maybe even disagree for a while...but ultimately, our congregation will find ourselves ready to move from this place, and we will be ready.

The Holy Spirit led Jesus up to the wilderness in order that he might be tempted by the devil. He followed the Spirit, because he knew he had no other choice, and because he knew he would triumph over the temptations, and even the devil himself.

The Holy Spirit is leading us up to the wilderness, perhaps to be tempted as well. What kind of temptations might we experience? In our gospel lesson, Jesus was first tempted by hunger. He had not eaten for 40 days, which is close to the limit of human endurance for going without food. Most people die after 30 days without food. Jesus did not. But with Jesus in a vulnerable position of being extremely hungry, the devil challenged him to turn some stones into loaves of bread.

What kinds of hungers might we experience in the wilderness? As we are discerning our future, as we are without a permanent home, what nourishment might we be missing, what temptations will we face?

It will be tempting to hunger for a building. That is just a natural and predictable feeling for a faith community. It's the most obvious. After 70 years in the same building, in the same place, we should expect that we will feel displaced and vulnerable. But in knowing that, if we can resist the temptation to rush into the first building we come upon, we just might hear God's Word in the wilderness, guiding us to our next home.

We will not be without options. We have two congregations willing to share their space with us. Both communities understand what we will be facing in our journey in the wilderness. Both understand that our journey with them might be temporary, or it might be long lasting.

But even with our lodging secure, we will be hungry. We will be tempted. We will be vulnerable. On one hand, we will be free from the constraints of maintaining and insuring a building, and on the other, we will ache for the comfort and security of a roof over our heads, a roof that belongs to us.

We will be hungry for some privacy. Even if this congregation votes to build a new building, we will need to spend some time sharing worship space, sharing office space, sharing fellowship space with the generous neighbors who have offered us lodging while our new building is being built. Or, should we vote to keep our resources, and enter into a more permanent agreement with a ministry partner, then we will hunger for the days when we had our own space.

The wilderness can be a scary and foreboding place. It can also be a place of cleansing and clarity. The wilderness can be a miserable and uncomfortable place, but it can also be an exhilarating and stunningly beautiful place.

With the time we have before we will need to move into the wilderness, we can begin to think about the things we need to bring on our journey. We will be tempted to bring more things than we need. We will be tempted to store and preserve things that may need to go. What we need to bring with us is our faith, our love, and our impulse to remain a faith family under God. If we have these three things, we won't need anything else. Everything else will be a luxury.

The devil will encourage us to turn all sorts of things into a loaf of bread: items we've left behind, other people's things, new things that capture our imagination...but our faith is strong, and we know that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

We aren't in the wilderness yet. But those days are not far off. In the time we have left, we can plan, we can pray, and we can prepare. Our bread still has time to rise, our bags can be packed for the journey, we need not be tempted by the devil in our time of vulnerability. The journey is ours and ours alone, and nobody else can walk it for us.

We aren't being freed from captivity like the people of Israel, unless you view being responsible for a building that can't be repaired as captivity. We *are* being tested and tempted as a faith community as to whether we can stay true to our call to be community, whether we can be true to our call to stay together on our journey. We will have everything we need for our journey, as long as we have the Word of God, the support of our Lord and Savior, and the will to persevere in the face of challenges and setbacks. I believe we have those resources, and even more that have yet to be revealed.

Let's start getting ready. Amen.